

## The devastating blaze

*As we mourn, practical steps must get underway to overcome vulnerabilities*

**T**HE Thursday night's fire in old Dhaka with its horizontal and vertical swipes wreaked such havoc on human lives and property that it sent instant shock waves throughout the country and well beyond. As we find ourselves in a national mourning mode and pray for salvation of the departed souls and early recovery and rehabilitation of the victims, our intense anguish must steel us into a resolve to avert recurrence of any such disaster. And, we believe that it is within our means to accomplish the task whatever may be the enormity of the problems. These are basically structural giving rise to built-in vulnerabilities which induced as they are by manmade factors can be redressed through human intervention.

The density of population per square km in much of old Dhaka is among the highest in the world. As though that was not enough, the housing blocks of all denominations are clustered in thickly concentrations edging out to dead ends. It is common knowledge that through the blind alleys the fire brigades cannot gain access to fire and put it down with the required speed.

The stipulation for keeping a certain space between two houses or blocks of them and minimum accessibility to and from habitats are deliberately flouted and there is no one to demand compliance. None of the do's and don'ts of building codes are applied by any authority, and even if attempted gets easily bribed away. With each devastating fire accident the dire need for public awareness is forcefully underscored.

Besides, there are no fire safety escapes, let alone fire extinguishers and other safety devices within housing compounds. What is particularly dangerous for civic life is the string of factories intruding into residential areas with all their inflammable materials and hazardous tools. The tangled webs of electric wiring bearing witness to taking out mostly unauthorised connections from over-burdened transformers are prone to accidents.

In all, a fire is just waiting to break out and go out of control just about anywhere in the older part of Dhaka. Furthermore, if fire has caused devastation, its fallout is even greater, thanks to our unpreparedness to face up to relief, rescue and hospitalisation challenges.

Given the vulnerabilities in so many fronts to fire and building collapses, the government will be well advised to constitute a high level committee to devise practical ways and means to prevent such a catastrophe happening again. We urge the government to do some restructuring with demolition and relocation of hazardous buildings and acquisition of land to allow for creation of spaces between habitats. Simultaneously, we should launch a sustained public awareness campaign to educate land and house owners on the necessity of abiding by the building code including fire safety precautions.

Rather than piecemeal and ad hoc measures, we need to take a mega view of the flaws and inadequacies in civic life and set about overcoming them in a planned way.

It is high time not only to think out of the box but also act out of it with best practices followed in other cities that had had their bad days in mind and a positive vision for the future.

## High migration cost fallout

*Why not bank-roll manpower export?*

**A**LTHOUGH the overseas employment minister Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain has been harping the same tune, there is a good deal of rationale behind it. The argument behind his assertion that high migration cost may spell doom for manpower export in future is forceful enough to draw attention. Already, we are taking the brunt of a declining curve in overseas employment requiring an effective thrust to shore it up.

The self-deceived employees have to spend Tk 2 to 2.5 lakh to go abroad, mostly on borrowed money, but the money they go on to earn hardly yields any surplus to repay the loans. In fact, they are usually in the red. Therefore, they are constrained to overstay their contracted periods thinking they will be able to repay their debts in addition to remitting money to the country after meeting their subsistence costs. That is exactly when they turn illegal migrants in the eye of the host country, virtual fugitives from the law. In the process, the country earns a bad name which gets reflected through different ways, one of them being lowering the quota for Bangladeshi intake. True, the recession has had its crunch effect. But that is more the reason why we must redouble our efforts in winning back some of the lost jobs. At the same time, the government should essentially gear up to break new grounds in overseas employment.

It is of utmost importance that we train up manpower on the basis of market needs, both domestic and international. The time is up for not any more sticking to conventional job creation activities.

On the specific question of migration costs, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), the minister thinks, 'can send workers at Tk 25 to 30 thousand', if so he adds, it will pressurise the recruitment agencies to lower their fees substantially. We are not too sure of the low cost cited by the minister but it appears to us that the answer to the whole issue lies in entrusting a bank with the task of financing such migration with job permits. Why is this not coming about?



Let us harness the enthusiasm of the youth.

## Youth are calling: Are we listening?

That can be done by changing the minds of 76% of the youth who think that they have little or no influence over government decisions, or are unsure of their capacity to influence. The youth of Bangladesh have spoken yet again. But are we listening?

NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY

**9**8 and 74. If I am asked, I would say these are the two figures that sum up the mood of Bangladesh's youth. A staggering 98% of them believe that they should be involved in social work. On the other side of the coin, 74% of them are not interested in politics.

Throughout the report "Bangladesh: The Next Generation," there are figures that highlight this dichotomy in thoughts and deeds of today's youth. At one end there is the optimism and the desire to do good, but on the other the apathy and belief that they don't count. This is a nation whose history has mostly been molded by its younger citizens.

Be it the Language Movement of 1952 or the political movements of 1969, '71, or '90, youth led and the nation followed. The government should acknowledge the fact that in the last general election the first time voters (almost 35% of the electorate) by and far put their stamp next to the candidates of the ruling party. This went against conventional wisdom of the day. But the youth had spoken.

It may not be over-simplification to say that "Digital Bangladesh," the desire to see the war criminals tried, and a rejection of the previous government's notorious greed, had lead the youth to jump on the Obamaesque dinbodol bandwagon of the Awami League. But since getting absolute majority in the Jatiya Sangsad and forming

a government, have they done much to reward this massive potential vote bank?

Initial suggestions of a close bond were there. Young ministers like Dipu Moni, Sohel Taj, Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury and Barrister Taposh seemed to be AL's new face. A new generation of leaders to whom the reins were being passed on. Digital Bangladesh too was being fleshed out to be more than just a slogan on a manifesto.

Then things went wrong. Taj left in a huff, claiming that his authority was being undermined. AL's youth wing, Chattr League (BCL), started showing that they cared more about financial gain than addressing issues of the youth. Digital Bangladesh started to become the butt of jokes as on-again-off-again policies and power shortages kept people guessing what that term actually meant.

Overall, the AL government, like those of the past, has failed to consistently connect with the youth. Issues of education, employment and empowerment have been left un-addressed. The "Next Generation Report" picks up on this. While 87% of the youth are enrolled in education programs, they don't believe that the education they are getting will get them jobs. Or will play a significant part in getting jobs at any rate. They think bribery, nepotism and connections are needed for a decent job. This makes 41% of them want to take the first plane out of the country in search of better education, jobs, and opportunities.

Digital Bangladesh too has failed to

deliver so far. True that it is a decade-long journey and not an overnight miracle, but the government has failed to articulate what it actually means for the youth. 73% of the younger population has mobile phones, but only 15% uses the internet. This is a shame because Digital Bangladesh, over anything else, can deliver us to the promised land. But only if we absorb the youth into the movement.

Youth need education. Education that will give them the skill sets to succeed in today's economy. That means knowledge of English and Math. And that of creativity, logic and research. Quite unlike the prevalent learning by rote. It means young migrant workers becoming plumbers, mechanics, welders, cooks and drivers, and not merely low-paid manual labourers.

Youth need jobs. Not low-value-adding agriculture jobs. But jobs in factories and offices where they can put to use their intellect and industry. Today, we hold the agriculture sector as sacred cow. But it is time for us to take a knife to that. Given our ever-growing population and the pressure it brings to land usage, we cannot expect to solve our employment needs through this sector. Instead of an acre of land that can productively employ say 20 people, we need an acre of factory floor that can employ 20,000.

Using technology, one can leapfrog the stumbling block of education content and delivery; we can create knowledge jobs in ITES (IT enabled services -- i.e., graphic design outsourcing) and other techie industries like pharmaceuticals; we can activate millions of points of entrepreneurship through e-commerce and exports.

How do we do it? Quite easy. While we wait for the larger more grandiose plans to pan out, we could do two things. Firstly, empower e-commerce, not through a few

monopolistic chosen ones, but by allowing anyone to make and enable transactions. Remember there was a Bangladeshi in the team that made PayPal. And secondly, make bandwidth cost free (or at least extremely cheap) for end users. The combination of the two will generate massive innovations, which, in-turn, will facilitate commerce to boom.

Youth need engagement and empowerment. It is not good enough any longer to just pay lip service to them. Be mindful, they constitute a good 70+% of the electorate. A figure that, for the next few elections, will only increase. Today, one in five youth says they have no national role-model. The question for any leader should be, how do I find a place in their minds? That is through engagement.

BCL's my-tender-is-bigger-than-your-tender ways may have led AL to disown them, but it shouldn't be an excuse to disengage from the youth altogether. In fact, the exact opposite should be done. Connect at every opportunity. Bring in youth leadership into the party grassroots. Use the desire the youth have for social work to activate them there. Encourage and promote young leaders to rise to the top. The absolute top.

Induct more of them into the cabinet and party presidium. India's Congress Party with the eye to the future, has transformed the Youth Congress as the heart and soul of the party. Anyone who is interested in succeeding as our next leader needs to earn his spurs. And that can be done by changing the minds of 76% of the youth who think that they have little or no influence over government decisions, or are unsure of their capacity to influence.

The youth of Bangladesh have spoken yet again. But are we listening?

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## Israel has challenged the world

Israel is not the face of Jews, who are known as a peace-loving community all over the world. Israel may have corrupted the society but it has not replaced its value system. Let us not allow Israel to blacken or brutalise the face of Jews. They have proud traditions.

KULDIP NAYAR

**I**T all depends on how you interpret the "Right to Live." The Israelis believe that they can live only if their state, Israel, is not challenged by any power or people in the Middle East. Others, particularly the Palestinians, who were once strongly opposed to the existence of Israel, believe that they, however weak militarily, too have the right to live.

Over the years, the countries in the region have come round to extending recognition to Israel, provided it withdrew to its original borders, mandated by the UN in 1948 when the state was founded. Israel has neither vacated the territories it has forcibly occupied nor has it stopped new Jewish settlements that have come up on the territories won during the wars.

Tel Aviv reluctantly agreed last year to vacate the Gaza strip -- a small piece of land wedged between Egypt and Israel -- but kept it under close supervision and blocked outside contact. Although most of the 1.5 million people in Gaza are sustained by the UN's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the Islamist movement Hamas believes that it is the custodian of the Gaza citizens. To some extent it is true because Hamas guards the coastline. But it is seen as a gun-crazy force which has often fired missiles inside Israel -- a constant provocation to Tel Aviv.

Because of Israel's blockade the Gaza population generally lives on less than \$1 a day, and 60% of them have no access to

water. Luxury goods are banned. A UN survey last year said that it took 68 days to deliver health and hygiene kits.

The nine-ship aid flotilla, attacked by Israeli troops this week, was carrying food, medicine and such other necessities collected by volunteers from Britain, Ireland, Algeria, Kuwait, Greece and Turkey. There was nothing hush-hush about the mission. It was a humanistic effort which was well publicised and well-supported. But Israel did not approve of it because it believed that the people in Gaza had gotten enough of food from the UNRWA, which did not agree with the contention.

That Tel Aviv behaves in a brutish, inhuman way is too well-known. The very election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, known for his dictatorial methods, showed that Israel had opted for a ruler who knew no conciliation, no compromise and did not believe in any gesture of peace. The world is naturally aghast over the Israeli attack or, for that matter, its policy to live by the dint of force.

Yet Tel Aviv's attitude should not come as a surprise because it has always lived in this manner, and has unambiguously told the world that it will treat the Palestinians and their woes in its own way. After the death of Yasser Arafat, the Palestine leader, there has been none of his stature to visit the different countries and draw their attention to the sufferings of Palestinians, some of whom have taken refuge in the Gaza strip. International opinion reacts to a particular

incident, like the attack on flotilla, but not to the demands of Palestinians.

The West, particularly America, is most to blame for lessening of attention to Palestine. The non-aligned world too has grown cool. And there has been no condemnation from NAM. India's neglect is painful because it is one of the very few countries which spoke against Israel's policy of annexation. True, New Delhi is dependent on certain types of arms from Tel Aviv. Yet people in the world expect a more strident attitude from India. Its foreign office's expression of condemnation is neither adequate nor unequivocal.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh should have himself issued a sterner statement. True, he cannot take Tel Aviv to task as Jawaharlal Nehru would do, openly siding with the oppressed Palestinians. He did not give recognition to Israel as long as he lived. Even his daughter, Indira Gandhi, followed his path. But the soft policy was initiated by the subsequent Congress government.

The world should realise that the scant attention paid to the attack on the flotilla had no effect on Israel, whose troops operated outside its own waters. Already, the result of Israel's strong-handed methods is that fundamentalism in Gaza is growing. There is every danger that the population may go the Taliban way.

The UN is doing a good job by opening beach camps to wean children away from the mosques where the Islamists impart instructions on Quran and guerilla warfare at the same time. Yet the fact remains that Israel has devised a policy of overawing the countries in the region and suppressing the anti-Jewish opinion. So long as Tel Aviv believes that it is surrounded by "hostile" states and that it has to maintain its superiority, it will continue to acquire more weapons and sabotage any effort at conciliation.

America is the only nation which can put pressure on Israel. But every US president

weighs how much he can do without annoying the powerful Jewish lobby in America. President Barack Obama appears to be a fish of a different kettle but his reaction is lukewarm. He may not be a Clinton who brought the Israeli Prime Minister and Yasser Arafat together to shake hands and arrive at an understanding which had the making of a settlement.

Obama has to start all over again and emphasise on Israel that peace or security in the region can be achieved through conciliation, not by force. The Security Council's resolution was too tepid to be taken seriously.

The attack on a flotilla indicates how power has become the arbiter in the world. Countries in a region have to come together to withstand pressure from outside. This is yet another reminder to South Asia that unless it gets its act together, it may expose itself to outside interference. The manner in which the US is enhancing its presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan is ominous. The region must wake up to the danger.

Israel has reintroduced gunboat diplomacy. Colonisation is something of the days when there was no UN, no forum to discuss aggression and no lobby to seek peace. What has happened at Gaza cannot be taken lightly. The entire international community has to sit up and take notice of it. Israel cannot get away with it as it has by squeezing out resistance from Palestine where people have been reduced to a commodity that Tel Aviv can peddle in the manner it likes.

Israel is not the face of Jews, who are known as a peace-loving community all over the world. Israel may have corrupted the society but it has not replaced its value system. Let us not allow Israel to blacken or brutalise the face of Jews. They have proud traditions.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.